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It's No Citizen Kane: Legendary Cinematographer Gregg Toland Directs December 7th

by [Audrey Amidon](#) on December 3, 2014

By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th of 1941, Gregg Toland had already won an Oscar for the cinematography of *Wuthering Heights* and created the distinctive look of *Citizen Kane* that is still discussed in introductory film classes today. But Toland wanted more than to be the most famous cinematographer of his day: Toland dreamed of becoming a director. Unfortunately, Toland's one and only directing project, the unreleased long version of the United States Navy's *December 7th*, is nothing short of a disaster.

After the United States entered the war, Toland answered the call to join the United States Navy and John Ford's Field Photo Unit. Toland's first assignment was to make a film about Pearl Harbor. The film would be the first major government film production of the war and was intended to reassure the American public that we would be soon be back on our feet. This was Toland's chance to shine.



*The US Navy's first major film project, **December 7th** was intended to reassure the American public that we would swiftly recover from the Pearl Harbor attack. (Still from film.)*

Toland arrived in Honolulu in January of 1942, a month after the attack. Six weeks later, John Ford was sent to check on the production. While there, Ford shot footage of ships being rebuilt and troops working together and then, in April, left Toland to complete the film. Production stretched on. Over the course of months, Toland returned to Hollywood to shoot dramatic scenes and recreations of the attack to fill in the incomplete film record. Finally, in December of 1942, Toland was ready to show his first cut, an 85 minute feature.

Lowell Mellet, a liaison between Hollywood and the War Department, was the first to see the final product. He was horrified.

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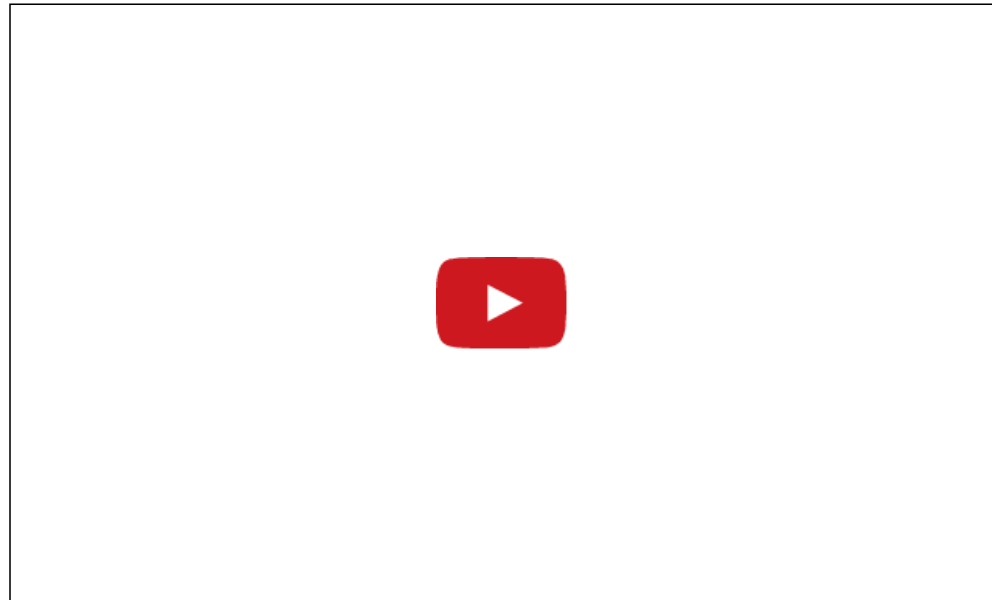
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Remember, the criteria for successful completion of Toland's assignment were simple: the film should be turned around quickly and should make the public feel that the naval fleet was recovered and prepared for battle. The film that Toland screened took nearly a year to complete and can only be described as *bananas*. (Really, it's difficult to overstate this one. If you have a chance, you really need to watch it.)



Toland's *December 7th* includes long sequences of Uncle Sam (played by the legendary Walter Huston) being admonished by his "conscience" (played by character actor Harry Davenport) for vacationing too much and not taking seriously the "hyphenated" threat of Japanese-Americans. The overt racism far surpasses even the propaganda films that were shown only to the troops and intended to instill scorn for the enemy (that would be our actual enemy, the Japanese nationals that the US military was fighting in the Pacific). The film depicts everyday Japanese-Americans as lying in wait to collect information from unsuspecting tongue-flappers. Viewers are reminded over and over that there are 150,000 Japanese-Americans in Hawaii. By the logic of the film, that would equal 150,000 spies and saboteurs. Even the children.

The film concludes with the ghost of an American soldier strolling through a military cemetery and explicating an extremely unwieldy baseball metaphor to demonstrate his belief in the American cause. On the positive side, since this is Gregg Toland's film, it's all very beautifully shot.



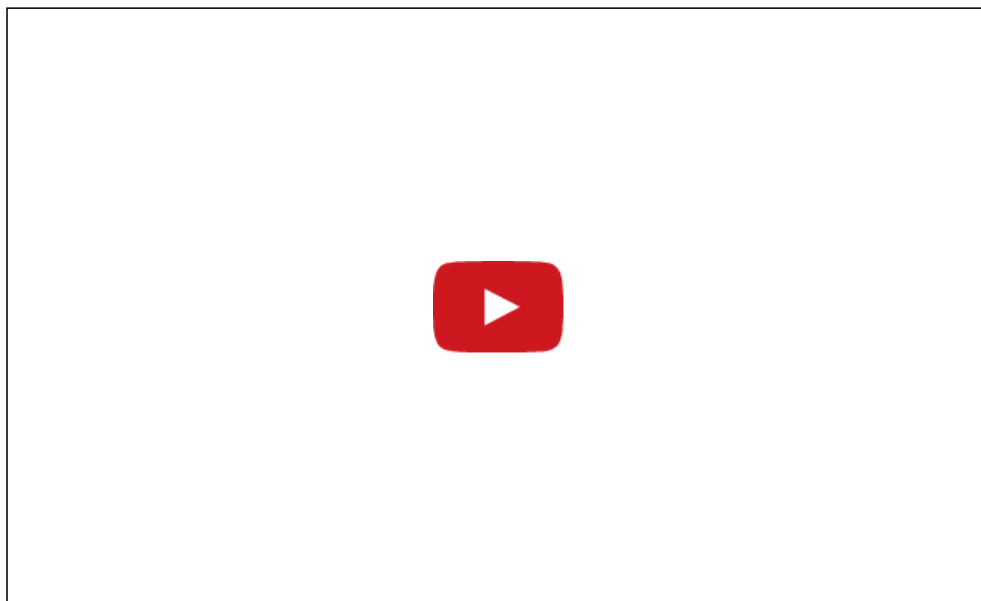
In Gregg Toland's version of the film, Uncle Sam's conscience chastises him not being too trusting of Japanese-Americans living in Hawaii. (Still from film.)

After viewing the film, Mellet scrambled to make sure that it would not be released to the public. In addition to Toland's *December 7th* just being a really bad film, Mellet was

concerned about the scope of the re-enactments. Much of the Pearl Harbor attack depicted in the film was created in a special effects studios at Fox, which made it little more than a fictional account of the battle.

And then there was the problematic anti-Japanese-American sentiment. In a [recent talk](#) at the National Archives' McGowan Theater, author Mark Harris [explained](#) that it wasn't so much the racism itself that was the problem (after all, the American government was paranoid enough to intern Japanese-Americans in camps), it was the *level* of suspicion that it cast on Japanese living in the United States. The U.S. government's plan was to "redistribute" the Japanese-American population throughout the country to keep them from amassing sizable communities. If Toland's film were to be released, it might cause every small town in America to reject the families that were expected to resettle there. It's a distasteful distinction to make, but it ultimately led to Toland's *December 7th* being heavily cut.

The task of fixing the *December 7th* went to John Ford. As the head of the Field Photo Unit, Ford was responsible for Gregg Toland, and the debacle reflected poorly on his command. Ford and editor Robert Parrish quickly re-cut the film, hacking out over 50 minutes so that the final version was just over half an hour. The film was still too long to play as an opening short in public movie theaters, and was too late to serve its original purpose anyway. Ford's cut was approved for troops and munitions workers and released in early 1943.



Despite its troubled history and limited release, *December 7th* won the [1944 Academy Award for best documentary short](#). Gregg Toland never directed another film, but his failure did nothing to tarnish his reputation as one of the best and most influential cinematographers in film history.

*All of the information about the production of **December 7th** comes from Mark Harris's excellent book **Five Came Back**, a history of five Hollywood directors who served in World War II. You can [view his talk about the book on our YouTube channel](#).*

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COMMENTS



Cathy Hart Conrad December 8, 2014 at 8:25 pm

Is Harry Davenport the same actor who portrayed Dr. Meade in "Gone With The Wind"?



Audrey Amidon December 10, 2014 at 1:02 pm

Yes he is!

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